

PRACTICAL GUIDE

The 'Brethren' Movement: A Briefing Note

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1.0 Introduction

There is often much lack of knowledge about the Christian movement frequently known simply as the 'Brethren', and there is often confusion and lack of knowledge about the different strands of the movement. This is so among other Evangelicals, and, understandably, it can be even more profound among others.

This practical guide provides factual information on the Brethren movement, outlines the main sub-groups of Brethren, and gives more detailed information on the 'Open (or Christian) Brethren'.

An important contextual aspect is the publicity frequently given to the characteristics and practices of one particular group of 'Exclusive Brethren' (now known as 'The Plymouth Brethren Christian Church'), and the frequent assumption that they are the only type of 'Brethren', or that all types of 'Brethren' follow the same practices as each other and have the same attitudes to interaction with wider society.

2.0 Origins

All the different sub-groups of 'Brethren' have their origins in a single spiritual movement which sprang up in about 1830 and which was particularly associated with the University of Oxford and the cities of Dublin and Plymouth (hence the term, 'Plymouth Brethren', which is sometimes used). The movement was one of a number growing out of the Evangelical Revivals of early in the nineteenth century, all of which sought to restore in different ways what were considered to be the practices of the New Testament church, or at least to substitute something radically different from the institutionalised nineteenth-century church in Britain.

The 'Brethren' movement and the resulting group of about 150 local congregations split in 1845–1848, initially into two branches: (1) those associated with the leader, J. N. Darby; these came to be known by others as the 'Exclusive' or 'Closed' Brethren; and (2) the 'Open Brethren' associated particularly with the Bristol philanthropist, George Müller.

3.0 The Exclusive Brethren

In the period 1880–1910, the Exclusive group ((1) above) split several further times on doctrinal and disciplinary issues. From the 1950s, the largest of the resulting Exclusive groups turned decisively in a sectarian direction, on the basis of the doctrine of 'separation' from the world, and required their members to conform to particular practices, including, for example, withdrawal from professional bodies; and from eating with unbelievers. Failure to conform led to exclusion from contact, even between members of the same family when they reached teenage years. This group has been known as the 'Taylor-Symington-Hales' Brethren (hereinafter for simplicity, the 'Taylor Brethren') after the succession of recognised international leaders of the group. The group now describes itself as the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church.

A number of members left this group in the late 1950s and early 1960s, often finding new spiritual homes among other Exclusive Brethren, with the Open Brethren, or other Evangelical churches including among Baptists and Anglicans. In 1970, there was a further significant secession from the group; for the most part, those concerned continued as Exclusive Brethren, though fragmenting into a number of distinct groups over time. All were dissociated from the Taylor Brethren, and in some cases, links have now been made with Evangelical Christianity more widely. Overall, it is believed that the number who left between the late 1950s and early 1970s amounted to not less than one third of the total number of Taylor Brethren in the late 1950s.

So there remains today in the UK a number of relatively small groupings (probably numbering 2,000 or 3,000 members in total) which are best thought of as Exclusive, but which are very much not associated with the Taylor Brethren and which do not follow their particular practices resulting from the doctrine of separation. The sub-groups of these are known as Glanton, Lowe, Kelly, and variously-named groups deriving from the split in 1970.

Today, the Taylor Brethren (the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church) say that their group numbers over 50,000 worldwide and in the UK about 16,000.

The Taylor Brethren are largely located in the UK, the old Dominions and the USA. In the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland and France, there are significant numbers of Exclusive or Closed Brethren which are also not associated with the Taylor Brethren—these are often described as Darbyist. While they are distinctively Brethren, they are not fundamentally different in belief, life and practice from many other Evangelical groups.

4.0 The Open Brethren (or Christian Brethren)

The Open Brethren grew rapidly after 1850 and, thanks to a strong missionary impulse, have established congregations in at least 155 countries in the world. Because of the decentralised character of the grouping, firm figures are not available, but the data suggest that at present worldwide there are some 40,000 congregations with perhaps 2.7m attenders of all ages. In the UK, in common with many other Christian groupings, there has been significant decline in numbers in the last 50 years. There are now less than 1,000 congregations in the UK with perhaps some 40,000 attenders.

4.1 Movement rather than denomination

The Open Brethren are better thought of as an organic movement or grouping of churches, rather than as an organised denomination. Each local congregation is independent and self-governing. There are no formal institutions above the level of the congregation, though there are national 'service groups' which seek to assist with matters such as evangelism, mission, overseas relief and development etc on a supra-congregational basis. These have widespread support and encouragement from the congregations and individual church participants.

4.2 Distinctive features

While there has been theological influence on the Open Brethren from the Exclusive Brethren (more in the 19th and early 20th centuries than now), there has been little practical contact between the two groups since the split in 1848, and they have each evolved a distinct and separate sub-culture.

As in the case of many other Christian groupings and denominations, the Open Brethren range widely from conservative congregations to those that might be described as liberal or progressive (though none are theologically liberal). In the UK, the congregations are in character and beliefs very like Baptist and other independent Evangelical churches, and their work, modes of operation and activities are very similar. They have three key distinguishing features:

- a commitment to communion on a weekly basis, in many churches associated with extempore worship (similar to Quaker worship but with less silence), though in the more progressive churches the particular form of extempore worship is now less common than it used to be.

- plural, largely-unpaid leadership—most churches are led by a body of elders, each of whom has equal standing with the rest (though many churches have now also appointed paid staff).
- every member ministry—it is assumed that all in the congregation have an obligation to Christian work and service, so that the spiritual, social and practical activities of the congregation are shared on a wide basis.

Just like Baptist churches, the congregations practise believers' baptism. Baptism or formal church membership is not generally required of those who take communion: communion in Open Brethren churches is stated as being open to all who are Christian believers, whether regular attenders or visitors. All meetings are open to all-comers and many meetings are specifically intended for them.

Open Brethren churches do not normally maintain formal membership, requiring application and admission. It is more accurate to speak of regular attenders, for whom the leaders would regard themselves as pastorally responsible. In general, such regular attenders do not have voting rights for any purpose: new leaders are selected by the existing leaders, with varying degrees of consultation with regular attenders.

4.3 Evangelism, mission and action

Open Brethren churches have a strong commitment to evangelism and mission, in their own churches and abroad. They are very active in children's work, youth work (they have spawned a large number of vibrant summer camps for young people) and work among the elderly. Many are increasingly involved in community work, e.g., activities for parents and pre-school children and neighbourhood support to local communities, and in relief and development abroad in association with continuing foreign mission. Still today, the Open Brethren contribute disproportionately among Evangelical church groupings to personnel working abroad in mission, relief and development, both personnel associated with Open Brethren mission support groups and those who work with non-denominational mission groups.

4.4 Public life and academia

Many individuals associated with Open Brethren churches (and with the non-Taylor Exclusive Brethren) have been prominent in public life over the last three generations, the way being led by the philanthropist, Sir John Laing, the founder of the building firm of that name. Among many academics, in the recent past the Regius Professorships in Hebrew in both Oxford and Cambridge have been occupied by scholars of Open Brethren background.

4.5 Influence on Evangelicalism

For 150 years, the Open Brethren have had extensive influence on Evangelicalism more widely through certain key ideas (e.g., 'living by faith' as the mechanism for financing mission and Christian work); through the involvement of individuals in inter-denominational activities (such as Billy Graham missions) and para-church bodies; and through the movement of personnel to other groupings (e.g., the Charismatic/New Church movement owed much to early leaders who had been nurtured in the Open Brethren).

4.6 Labelling

It should be noted that often Open Brethren congregations do not describe themselves as such: some more conservative congregations stick to the historic practice of not designating themselves since they regard the only legitimate biblical designation as being 'Christian' or 'believers'; while more progressive congregations prefer to avoid the public disapproval and suspicion that has come to be attached to the term 'Brethren', though they might privately describe themselves as 'Brethren-heritage' or 'Brethren-background' churches.

4.7 Finance

Financially, as independent congregations, Open Brethren churches are self-supporting, even though some have quite high expenditures per head on their activities. Individual congregations do not expect to receive financial support from outside and there are no significant mechanisms for redistributing resources from congregation to congregation, though individual congregations choose to give substantial support to individuals and bodies working elsewhere at home and abroad.

5.0 Charitable status and Open Brethren churches

In the past, Open Brethren buildings have been held either by a trust for the particular building (in earlier days, often established by the land transaction enabling building) or by regional bodies established to hold land and buildings (typically with designations concluding 'Evangelization Trust'). This pattern continues, with some hundreds of Open Brethren buildings held by Evangelization Trusts or their successors, and other buildings held by individual trusts. The individual trusts often had generic, recognisably Open Brethren statements of belief and practice, which controlled the identity of the users of the buildings. Typically, in the past, there were no trusts relating to the operations (and related income and expenditure) of the congregations which were the users of the buildings, though it was normal for the elders and/or deacons to account annually to the congregation for income and expenditure. Development of charity law and practice over the past generation has increasingly meant that trusts have been formed to take responsibility for congregational activities, and often there has been amalgamation of buildings and operations trusts. New constitutions have often imported the Evangelical Alliance's statement of beliefs as being the religious commitments to be advanced. This process of rationalization, modernisation and registration of Open Brethren trusts is still going on, sometimes involving conversion of trusts to charitable incorporated organisations, to manage risk better and avoid constant land transfer costs from trust buildings.

There are no known cases where Open Brethren churches and activities have had difficulty in registering their charities with the Charity Commission or the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator. On occasion, case officers can be uncertain whether the trust concerned has an Open Brethren background or whether it is to be regarded as associated with the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church. This practical guide may be of assistance in clarifying the matter.

Church Growth Trust and Partnership are able to give advice to individual congregations and trusts on trust and charity matters.

6.0 Further information

For further historical information on the Brethren, see Tim Grass, *Gathering to His Name: The story of Brethren in Britain and Ireland*, reprinted edition, Brethren Archivists and Historians Network 2013; Neil T.R. Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland 1838-2000*, Paternoster 2002; and Roger Shuff, *Searching for the True Church: Brethren and Evangelicals in Mid-Twentieth-Century England*, Paternoster 2005 (the last in particular contains much material on the evolution of Exclusive Brethren as well as Open Brethren). Briefer material is available in Peter Cousins, *The Brethren*, Religious Education Press 1982 and at <http://brethrenhistory.org/?pageid=802>.

For further statistical and factual information on the Open Brethren worldwide, see Ken and Jeanette Newton (ed's), *The Brethren Movement Worldwide: Key Information*, 5th edition, International Brethren Conference on Mission & OPAL Trust, 2019. This can be viewed electronically by clicking [Brethren Movement Worldwide – IBCM Network](#).

7.0 Useful Contact Details

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Brethren Archivists and Historians Network

Tel: 01292 310528
Web: www.brethrenhistory.org

Christian Brethren Archive

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Oxford Road
Manchester
M13 9PP
Tel: 0161 275 8723
Web: (see address below)

<http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/searchresources/guidetospecialcollections/brethren/>